



Pandora's Box Was Opened Last Week

Posted by [Pierluigi Oliverio](#) on Monday, May 19, 2008

City Hall Diary

In a prior blog I wrote about the "mystery" of closed session meetings. These meetings occur every Tuesday morning and cover real estate, litigation and labor negotiations. In addition, everything covered at the meetings is confidential. Last week, the city council voted to release a revision of a closed session memo for public distribution called "Confidential Legal Advice Related to Imposition of Appropriate Conditions in Land Use Approval." This memo was released on May 16 so it could be shared with the general public and the development community.

The issue at hand is whether or not individual council members may ask for neighborhood amenities (like architecture, trees and parking for examples) when residential developments are being approved, so they may fit better into the existing community. The problem is that items the community asks for may not be required by existing city rules; therefore, those requests may not be allowed.

The release of this memo got me thinking of other things that should be released from closed sessions. Why stop at a memo about land use when our largest financial decisions do not see the light of day?

For example, labor negotiations are a long arduous process. In the past, the city and the unions have both pointed fingers at each other. Perhaps if these meetings were discussed in public, then there would be no finger pointing. In the era of sunshine, maybe we should consider making these meetings public, as is done in other parts of the country. It would be interesting to know, for example, the full dollar amounts of costs on proposals from each side through each stage of the negotiation, prior to final agreement.

If the city was being unfair, then everyone would know. If labor was asking too much, or they had good points about cost-of-living adjustments, then we would know. With the bankruptcy of our neighbor, Vallejo, it seems like we should shine more light on

collective bargaining, or, at least, the city should provide some type of summary of the negotiations to the public at an earlier time. If allowing the public to view the negotiations in real time would harm privacy, then, perhaps, the negotiations should be taped on video and shown after the agreement has been reached. The negotiations could be viewable on the internet or channel 26. That way, the public would at least get to see what took place.

In the end, we on the council vote on compensation and benefit increases. However, we as a council will be long gone when the aggregate effect of past votes impacts the budget and neighborhood services. If decisions are made behind closed doors without public scrutiny, then it is easier to make unrealistic financial choices.

Making negotiations public will not take anything away from workers or make negotiations a game of "winners" and "losers." People need to be paid a good wage with good benefits, that's for sure. However, these decisions are nearly 70 percent of the budget and I think that public awareness is important.

So, in my opinion, if we can release a closed session memo on land use, we should certainly consider allowing more sunshine into collective bargaining that is currently done behind closed doors.

What are your thoughts? Constructive suggestions are welcome.

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